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ABSTRACT

Developments in the late 1830's and early 1840's concerning Franklin College, academic freedom, and slavery are traced. In the small eastern Ohio community of New Athens, there were political, economic, social, cultural, and religious influences that focused on the question of American slavery. The drama unfolded at the nondenominational but religiously influenced Franklin College, where ministers and laymen from heterogeneous branches of Presbyterianism disputed over gradual versus immediate emancipation of the slaves or clung to a neutral stance. A major repercussion was an onslaught on academic freedom leading to the resignations of two successive presidents, the departure of three professors, the imposition on the college of the principle of immediate emancipation, and a schism leading to the founding of Providence College in New Athens. In the latter institution, academic freedom fell victim to the requirement of accepting the gradualist approach to emancipation. This second site of higher learning soon expired, and the older college, Franklin, continued to spread an all-out effort to immediately solve the slave problem in eastern Ohio. (SW)

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"Academic Freedom, Slavery and College Rivalry"

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Rare, indeed, was the town of 317 residents in which sprouted two colleges locked in struggle over the issue of slavery. Such was the situation at New Athens, Ohio in the early 1840's. The confrontation included the impact of several branches of Presbyterianism and attacks on academic freedom. Moreover, in the older institution there had been two earlier conflicts leading to two successive presidential resignations.

Franklin College, founded in 1825, appeared as the first institution of higher education in Ohio for a religious, although nondenominational, purpose.[1] The founders were Scotch-Irish Calvinists who had come to eastern Ohio from western Pennsylvania. Between the founding and 1837, Franklin prospered under three energetic presidents and a faculty featuring John Armstrong, an internationally known mathematician, and Andrew F. Ross, a popular young classicist. Moreover, the college fastened its roots in the region because of the multifaceted imprint of its chief founder and long-time trustee and vice president, the Reverend John Walker--minister of several congregations, physician, and fiery champion of temperance, anti-freemasonry, and abolition.[2] However, anxiety alighted at Franklin because of three successive presidential demises, the first after seven years in office, the second after a mere two-year term, and the third following tragically one year of the inauguration.[3]

Thereupon, in March, 1837 the trustees chose for the presidency a person of vigorous constitution, but also of distinguished appearance and appropriate characteristics. A Pennsylvanian, he was the Reverend Joseph Smith, graduate of Jefferson College and Princeton Theological Seminary, and of educational and ministerial experience. Of Smith it has been said: "He was a Presbyterian of Presbyterians. His two grandparents, his father, his step-father, eight uncles, a brother, a son, two sons-in-law, and any number of cousins and more distant relatives, too numerous to mention were

Presbyterian ministers. An uncle and a brother died also in preparation for the same glorious work."[4] However, Smith was to run afoul of two Presbyterian clergymen, one of his own Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. (Old School), the other of the Associate Church.

In 1830 the Reverend Jacob Coon had become pastor of the Crabapple Presbyterian Church in U.S.A., three miles south of New Athens. Also a Pennsylvanian and Jefferson College graduate, he was the last theology student of the revered Presbyterian divine, the Reverend Dr. John McMillan. From that mentor Coon imbibed an unqualifyingly immediate abolition outlook on the slavery issue. Coon's determination to impose this on his flock led to a schism therein. Thereupon in 1838 Coon and his followers left Crabapple to establish the New Athens Presbyterian Church in U.S.A.[5]

Coon's action aroused Smith. Since his arrival in New Athens the latter had thought of adding to his presidential role that of founder-pastor of a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. made up of his own family, Franklin students, and New Athens residents. However, when Coon's church materialized in New Athens, Smith abandoned hope of setting up his own and in the fall of 1838 resigned the Franklin presidency.[6]

Yet there was another, even more important, element, veritably an academic freedom issue, in Smith's departure. This involved Walker and Coon. The former cut an impressive figure in eastern Ohio--cofounder of New Athens, guiding genius of Franklin's founding, the college's perennial vice president as well as trustee, esteemed pastor of four (ultimately two) Associate Church congregations, painstaking practitioner of the medical art, and scourge of secret societies and alcoholic consumers. Moreover, interpreting the 1811 decree on slavery of the Associate Synod as brooking no compromise on the immediate freeing of the slaves, he had become a power in the local and state abolition societies.[7] Walker thundered that Franklin faculty and students

must fulminate against any and all perpetuation of slavery. Coon enthusiastically seconded Walker.[8]

Smith refused to advocate the Walker-Coon view. Although he affirmed he was not proslavery, he felt that Franklin must be neutral in the controversy. Consequently, his adversaries attacked, claiming that at heart Smith was a slavery proponent. They raised questions. Had not Smith graduated at Jefferson College, an outpost of Southern aristocracy? Was he not an alumnus of Princeton Theological Seminary, a place of proslavery apologists? Had he not spent several years teaching and ministering in the slave states of Maryland and Virginia? Had he not married a lady of the Virginian slavocracy? Furthermore, was he not a college friend and longtime admirer of that notorious defender of slavery, the Reverend George Junkin? Parenthetically, it might be noted that John C. Calhoun affirmed that the best defense of Southern slavery he ever read was Junkin's speech before the Presbyterian Synod of Cincinnati.[9] (Junkin belonged to the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. [Old School].)

Walker and Coon gained a following. Indeed, a number of Franklin students spoke for the immediate abolition cause in various parts of eastern Ohio. According to his own words, "The agitation of the [slavery] question" upset Smith.[10] The attempt of the Walker-Coon party to impose its view on Smith was the determining factor in his leaving Franklin and returning to his former ministerial charge at Frederick City, Maryland and simultaneously becoming president of newly founded Frederick City College.[11]

Now Coon became president pro tem of Franklin. He remained as professor of natural philosophy and preceptorial instruction when in late 1838 the trustees elected as president the Reverend William Burnett, a Jefferson College alumnus. Andrew F. Ross, a Franklin professor at the time and later a great Franklin president, commented: "Mr. Burnett was, at the time of his appointment, an Associate Reformed Minister, near Pittsburgh, but had been

reared in the South, and had much of the Southern culture and character about him. He was a young man of fine culture, a popular preacher and accurate scholar."[12] As president Burnett served also as professor of mental and moral sciences, thereby giving courses on moral and political philosophy, and political economy. Burnett's appointment raised consternation in the Walker-Coon camp. A Pennsylvanian had been replaced by a South Carolinian! Another Jefferson College graduate had come to head beloved Franklin! (Parenthetically, it should be said that Coon himself hailed from Jefferson, but he had not hobnobbed with the Southerners there.[13]) Moreover, asked Burnett's critics, was he not a minister of the Associate Reformed Church, whose Southern Synod defended slavery?[14] Furthermore, for his courses in moral philosophy Burnett used as the textbook William Paley's The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy, a work condemned by the rabid abolitionists for spouting "emancipation should be a gradual . . . ."[15] Vice President Walker and Professor Coon again and again urged the mild president to come over to "the true light of abolition." But in the words of Professor Ross: "On the particular subject which then agitated the community, he was altogether reticent."[16] Eventually the radical antislavery group demanded that Burnett leave.[17] He resigned in 1840, resuming the ministry in Pennsylvania. Ross claimed that Burnett's departure resulted from his discouragement over the college's future because of the drop in enrollment stemming from the quarrel over slavery.[18] However, more significantly, Burnett himself wrote that his resignation stemmed from his unwillingness to bow to the Walker-Coon insistence that he join their abolition campaign.[19]

Burnett's resignation was immediately followed by those of Professors Armstrong and Ross, and also that of the Reverend William Taggart, Professor of the Evidences of Christianity. Ross stated that he and Armstrong had become pessimistic about the college's prospects because of the enrollment

problem.[20] However, by 1840 the fervently antislavery coalition had become definitely uneasy with these faculty members. The Walker-Coon group claimed that Armstrong, although a Covenanter, had developed a very conservative opinion on emancipation, veritably entering Junkin's camp. (Indeed, in 1841 when Junkin became president of Miami University, Armstrong joined him as professor of mathematics and civil engineering.) The all-out abolition circle charged that the young Ross, a devout layman of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A., was too sympathetic to both Smith and Burnett. Taggart, like Burnett, a minister of the Associate Reformed Church, aroused criticism because of adhering to the gradualistic approach to abolition, and also for using as his textbook View of the Evidences of Christianity because of its authorship by the detestable Paley.[21] Significantly, Armstrong believed that Ross and Taggart, along with himself, had become much disturbed over the increasing attacks on them and that they judged it prudent to leave.[22]

The weight of majority public opinion in eastern Ohio now prevailed. Without hesitation the bulk of the trustees decided to turn Franklin into a bastion of uncompromising abolition. Echoing Walker and Coon, they would brook no neutrality or reservation on the issue, let alone defense of the abominable institution. Walker expectedly continued as vice president. Coon again assumed the presidency pro tem while the trustees searched for a president. (Coon was uninterested in becoming president, being desirous of returning full-time to the ministry which he did upon the appointment of a president in September, 1840; however, he headed successively three academies.) The new president was the Reverend Edwin H. Nevin, a twenty-six-year-old Pennsylvanian of fine qualifications. A Jefferson College alumnus but untainted by Southern friendships, a graduate of Western Theological Seminary, and, like Smith, a minister in the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. (Old School), he arrived as an ardent abolitionist. He interpreted the

strong antislavery principlesof the 1818 General Assembly of his church as calling for the immediat. abolition of slavery throughout Christendom.[23] George K. Jenkins became professor of mathematics. A thirty-year-old Ohioan, he was an honor Franklin graduate and scholar. A member of the Society of Friends, naturally he abhorred slavery. Andrew Morrow Black took over the professorship of languages. A twenty-seven-year-old Ulsterman, he also was a Franklin graduate and scholar. Like Walker, he belonged to the antislavery Associate Church and while teaching at Franklin would enter into that denomination's clergy.[24]

Franklin now trumpeted the extreme abolition cause throughout eastern Ohio. The campus seethed with the fervor of a crusade. President Nevin not only proclaimed the principle of immediate abolition in the college chapel and classroom, but also from the pulpit of the New Athens Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. where he was pastor. Morevoer, not only in New Athens but elsewhere in the area his eloquence won attention and belief. Until his death in 1845 Walker with rapid fire peroration carried on for the movement in academe, in his congregations, in local and state abolition societies, and in annual national meetings of the Associate Synod, of which he was twice moderator. Professors Jenkins and Black added an appealingly scholarly touch to the campaign. Even students, indoctrinated by administration and faculty, ventured forth to gain converts.[25] Thus town and gown were coming closer together.

Nevertheless, this explosion of idealism soon encountered a near mortal suppression. Franklin had become heavily bogged in debt, and in 1842 the creditors sued for their claims. These included the administrator of the first president's estate, the second president's widow, ex-Professor Armstrong (still on the Miami faculty), and ex-Professor Coon, now Presbyterian pastor at Poland, Ohio. The trustees, stated a primary source, "were unable to

meet these claims, exhausted as they were by the derangement of their business, and previous expenditures in the erection of their [New Athens Presbyterian] Church structure and the support of their minister [first Coon, then Nevin]."[26] To satisfy the creditors the sheriff auctioned off the college property in August, 1842. The purchaser was John Lyle, acting for himself and others.[27]

Now a number of eastern Ohioans, including some former Franklin patrons, banded together and obtained the Franklin building. There they founded Providence College. The president of the board of trustees was the Reverend William Taggart, the ex-Franklin professor who had doubled as a Franklin trustee. The board secretary was Dr. John Campbell, a Franklin alumnus. Another trustee was the Reverend Benjamin Mitchell, pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Mt. Pleasant and ex-Franklin trustee. In November, 1842 Providence College opened with the Reverend Gilbert M. Hair as head. A twenty-seven-year-old Pennsylvanian, he had graduated at Washington College (Pa.), the sisterly Presbyterian rival of Jefferson College; he had studied theology under the Reverend Henry Hervey, an Ohioan Presbyterian who opposed immediate emancipation.[28] Hair was a clergyman in the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. Then in May, 1843 the Reverend Lemuel Fordham Leake became president of Providence.[29] A fifty-three-year-old New Jerseyite, he had graduated at Princeton College and Princeton Theological Seminary, and was also a minister in the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. A backer of Providence was the Reverend Moses Allen, a graduate of Jefferson College, an early student of theology of the Reverend Dr. John McMillan, and Coon's successor as pastor of Crabapple Presbyterian Church in U.S.A.; the latter congregation, the nucleus of which had opposed Coon in the schism of 1838, also supported Providence College.[30]

Walker and his disciples castigated the Providence camp as the pro-slavery party. However, as followers of the English theologian and utilitarian philosopher, William Paley, the Providence group favored the gradual

emancipation of the slaves. Indeed, one of the Providence trustees, Mitchell, was, like Walker, a prominent "conductor" in the "Underground Railroad," his "station" being his parsonage in Mt. Pleasant.[31] On the issue of slavery only the gradualist outlook was permitted by the Providence trustees and administration. Providence failed to attract students, quickly lost financial support, and collapsed within a year.[32]

On the contrary, Franklin College, like the phoenix, arose majestically. Most of the trustees remained loyal and, following the auction of the college property, almost at once gathered funds. The enterprising President Nevin and the indefatigable Trustee and Vice President Walker campaigned in their congregations at New Athens and Unity respectively, and in the broader environs of eastern Ohio. The talents of Professors Black, Jenkins, and James P. Mason (Jenkins' successor when Jenkins left to head a classical school) combined both to gain and hold students. Very quickly after the auction the trustees erected the Franklin College building on the New Athens Presbyterian Church lot, "thus vesting their title in the Trustees of the Church. Most appropriately and significantly they made it the portal into the Church which they had erected."[33] Franklin College wholeheartedly based itself on the principle of immediate abolition and President Nevin symbolized this by having engraved on the new college bell "Proclaim Liberty Through All the Land." Soon Franklin prospered under the seventeen-year-old presidency (1844-61) of the Reverend Alexander D. Clark, Franklin class of 1839. (Nevin resigned in 1844 to accept a pastorate in Cleveland.)[34]

In conclusion, the small eastern Ohioan community of New Athens served as the locale of an interesting, truly intriguing, scenario in the late 1830's and early 1840's. Present were interlocking developments in the realms of town and gown. Operating were intertwined elements in the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious spheres. These focused

on the pervasive question of American slavery. The drama unfolded at nondenominational but religious tinged Franklin College where ministers and laymen above all of heterogeneous branches of Presbyterianism--Associate, Associate Reformed, Covenanter, and Presbyterian in U.S.A.--disputed over gradual versus immediate emancipation of the slaves or clung to a neutral stance. A major repercussion was a decided onslaught on academic freedom leading to the resignations of two successive presidents, the departure of the three professors, the imposition on the college of the principle of immediate emancipation, and a schism leading to the founding of Providence College in New Athens. In the latter institution academic freedom fell victim to the requirement of accepting the gradualist approach to emancipation. Nevertheless, this second site of higher learning soon expired, and the older college, Franklin, all-out in its emphasis on the immediate solution to the slave problem, returned triumphantly and continued to spread that movement in eastern Ohio. Thus at the expense of academic freedom the worlds of academe and the practical were wedded in one section of ante-bellum 19th century United States of America.

NOTES

[1]It was originally called Alma College, the name change occurring in 1826. Laws of Ohio, Vol. XXIII (January 22, 1825), pp. 22-24; Vol. XXIV (January 31, 1826), p. 19.

[2]Reverend Johnston Welsh, Memoirs (Wheeling: privately printed, 1837), p. 102.

[3]Illness forced the third president to resign on February 7, 1837, and he died on April 4, 1837.

[4]Reverend W. H. Gill, The Pilgrim: A Sermon in Memory of the Life and Labors of Rev. Joseph Smith, D. D. (Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven and Co., 1869), p. 28.

[5]Reverend Jacob Coon, letter to Mr. Robert Gray White, November 30, 1838.

[6]A. F. Ross, LL.D., "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," Report of Proceedings of the Semi-Centennial Celebration of Franklin College, New Athens, Harrison County, Ohio (Barnesville, Ohio: Enterprise Book and Job Printing Office, 1875), p. 10.

[7]See, for example, Report of the Second Anniversary of the Ohio Anti-slavery Society Held in Mt. Pleasant, Jefferson County, Ohio. On the twenty-seventh of April, 1837 (Cincinnati: Antislavery Society, 1837), pp. 4, 9.

[8]Reverend Jacob Coon, letter to the Reverend James P. Ramsey, February 20, 1839.

[9]"George Junkin," National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York, James T. White and Co., 1893), Vol. III, p. 165.

[10]Reverend Joseph Smith, letter to the Reverend Alexander D. Clark, March 15, 1845. Clark was a student during Smith's presidency, and eventually headed Franklin (1844-61); he was an Associate Reformed minister.

[11]Reverend Joseph Smith, letter to the Reverend David Magie, December 21, 1838.

[12]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," p. 12.

[13]Coon, letter to White.

[14]Actually, by 1831 the Associate Reformed Synod of the West, to which Burnett belonged, had "called for all congregations to support a policy of immediate emancipation." William L. Fisk, "The Associate Reformed Church in the Old Northwest," Journal of Presbyterian History, Vol. XLVI, No. 3 (September, 1968), p. 167.

[15]Edmund Paley, ed., The Works of William Paley, D. D., and a Corrected Account of the Life and Writings of the Author (London: 1830), Vol. III, p. 158.

[16]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," p. 12.

[17]Reverend John Walker, interview, in the Reverend Dr. Ross Stevenson, Diary, March 12, 1840, p. [62]. Stevenson was a Franklin student at this time. He later became a clergyman in the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A.

[18]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," p. 12.

[19]Reverend William Burnett, letter to Professor James I. Kuhn, July 15, 1840.

[20]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," p. 12.

[21]Walker, interview, in Stevenson, Diary, March 12, 1840, p. [65].

[22]John Armstrong, letter to Professor Hiram Sims, August 18, 1840.

[23]Reverend Edwin H. Nevin, letter to the Reverend Thomas F. McGill, October 19, 1840.

[24]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," p. 12.

[25]Reverend James McArthur, "Reminiscences" (unpublished manuscript, 1879), p. 44. McArthur was a Franklin student at this time. He entered the clerical ranks of the Associate Church.

[26]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," pp. 12-13.

[27]Deed Record, Harrison County, Vol. J, p. 417. Records in possession of Mr. Charles B. Wallace, President of the Harrison County Historical Society, Cadiz, Ohio.

[28]Reverend Gilbert M. Hair, letter to Mr. Robert C. Rankin, December 10, 1842.

[29]Mistakenly a number of biographical sketches call Leake "president of Franklin College." See the Leake file in the alumni records of Princeton University and in Princeton Theological Seminary General Catalogue information form - 1872.

[30]A good source for Providence College is the Cadiz Republican; see, for example, September 22, 1842; October 13, 1842; and May 11, 1843.

[31]W. H. Hunter, "The Pathfinders of Jefferson County, Ohio," Ohio Archaeological and Historical Publications, Vol. VIII (1900), p. 186.

[32]Reverend Lemuel Fordham Leake, letter to Mr. Robert Gowan Campbell, September 10, 1857. Campbell, then a Franklin student eventually became a president and later a longtime professor and trustee of Franklin. He was also a minister of the United Presbyterian Church.

[33]Ross, "Historical Sketch of Franklin College," p. 13.

[34]Ibid., pp. 13-15.